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# **‘Together ... for only a moment’ British newspaper constructions of altruistic non-commercial surrogate motherhood**

van den Akker, Olga and Camara, Isatou and Hunt, Ben (2016)

## **Abstract**

**Objectives:** To explore how national altruistic surrogacy is framed in a representative selection of the British press. **Methods:** A study of 90 British national newspaper articles was carried out using the Lexis-Nexis data base to search for articles on altruistic surrogacy. Content analysis of gain, loss, neutral frames and high or low alarm and vulnerability frames in the titles and the body of the text was carried out. The type of construction used in the article content was also analysed. Data were coded and consensus reached using a coding strategy specifically developed for the purposes of this study. **Results:** Titles and content were predominantly loss, high alarm and high vulnerability framed. The content was also gain framed, and written with a focus on the social and legal aspects differentially between the newspaper types. **Discussion:** The tabloid press emphasizes social issues, and the middle market and serious press focus on legal issues of altruistic surrogacy. Selectively framed and reinforced information provided by the different newspapers, reflect the different readership, with Tabloid readers likely to be, surrogates (mostly from lower socioeconomic strata) and serious/ middle-market readers likely to be commissioning parents (mostly professionals).

**Key words:** Newspapers, Altruistic, Surrogacy, Traditional, Family

## **Introduction**

Surrogacy is practiced when a person cannot carry a baby for medical or social reasons. Surrogate arrangements can vary, for example, a surrogate can carry a baby who is genetically related to the commissioning parent(s) or to donors, using IVF (Full or gestational surrogacy; ASRM, 1990; HFEA, 2015). In other cases, the child may be related genetically to the surrogate mother and not to the mother who commissions and brings up the child (partial, straight or genetic surrogacy; ASRM, 1990; HFEA, 2015). This study reports on British newspaper reporting of altruistic surrogacy, given it is legal in the UK (Surrogacy Arrangements Act 1985) and commercial surrogacy is not, it is important to examine them separately as it is likely that media representations of them will differ.

Research and media reports on surrogacy are increasing although the practice of surrogacy is relatively uncommon (Shalev and Lemish, 2011). Both focus on the potential or actual problems experienced by the surrogate, the intended individual or couple, the surrogate baby or those involved in the medical or legal frameworks or with ethical, financial and psychosocial aspects in national (van den Akker, 2007) and international arrangements (Fronek & Crawshaw, 2014, Crawshaw et al, 2012; Blyth et al, 2014). According to Markens (2007, p7, surrogacy practices 'affect and are affected by social conflicts over reproductive choice, mothers versus fathers' rights and definitions of parenthood, motherhood and radicalized fears and the importance of the nuclear family structure'. It is therefore unsurprising there is much interest in this topic.

Previous research on attitudes towards infertility and surrogacy has reported that biological *and* genetic parenthood is globally perceived as normative (van den Akker 2001), reflecting the norm of heterosexual reproduction. Surrogacy does not conform to traditional family building norms even in societies where social variations in family formation are increasingly common (van den Akker, 2007). Attitude surveys have demonstrated that surrogacy is the least acceptable method of family building (Dunn et al, 1988; Halman et al, 1992; Genius et al, 1993); non-commercial altruistic surrogacy is more acceptable than commercial surrogacy (Krishnan, 1994), and religion affects acceptability of surrogacy (Chliaoutakis et al, 2002; Dempsey and Critchley, 2010). Partial surrogacy is also perceived as less acceptable than full surrogacy (Appleton, 1990; Bromham, 1991; Frazier and Chapman, 1994; BMA, 1996; Suzuki et al, 2006; Poote and van den Akker, 2009), although more recent research has shown attitudes to be more variable (Dempsey and Critchley, 2010; Constantinidis and Cook, 2012). The attitudes are likely to be influenced by media reports of controversial, negative, or illegal surrogate practices (Appleton, 2001). For example, news and entertainment programs are important sources of information for the general public (Shalev and Lemish, 2011), particularly when they report on relatively unknown (Gamble, 2013), or extreme topics, for example, where surrogacy was used in child sexual abuse (ABC News 9 December, 2014) and abandonment of a disabled surrogate baby (Mail Online, 2014). According to Shalev and Lemish (2011) since most people do not have first-hand knowledge of surrogacy, their information is largely obtained via media reports and broadcasts. This suggests, specifically framed media reporting may therefore play a role in shaping attitudes and providing a normative context.

Other research confirms more generally, that how issues are described by news media, influences how they are perceived (Chong and Druckman, 2007), understood (Bryant and Oliver, 2009), thought about by the public (Nelson et al, 1997), and that specifically framed media descriptions can influence people's attributions and evaluations (Tewksbury and Scheufele, 2009). It is important to know how newspapers frame their reports on surrogacy, in order to better understand changes in surrogacy practices (Crawshaw, Blyth and van den Akker, 2012).

The prospect theory provides a useful framework for this study as it proposes that the way in which a message is written or 'framed' can change the persuasive impact of the message even though the possible outcomes are equivalent. There are three types of frames; positive (gain is emphasized), negative (loss is emphasized) and neutral frames. In neutrally framed messages, no gain or loss is alluded to. Previous research on framing of health messages has shown mixed effects of gain or loss framed messages in experimental trials (Covey, 2014), although risky options tend to be preferred when a loss is emphasized; safe options are preferred when gains are emphasized (Tversky and Kahneman, 1981). Furthermore loss frames are more effective in changing behaviours of illness detection and gain frames more effective in health promotion behaviours (Rothman and Salovey, 1997). The effectiveness of gain or loss framed messages may also depend on the disposition of the person receiving the messages (Covey, 2014) which can have implications for future tailored practice. Framing of messages via different media can therefore have an influence on how the topic is understood, and may play a role in shaping, amongst other things, new 'norms of behaviour' or 'new realities' – a sense of reality constructed primarily by the media (Shaleh and Lemish, 2011, p1).

Media framing of social issues such as childhood obesity (Barry et al, 2011), intimate partner violence (Carlyle et al, 2008), abortion (Simon and Jerit, 2007), and infertility (Sangster and Lawson, 2014), have shown framing to be largely consistently used amongst newspapers, and is commonly used. Sangster and Lawson's, (2014) media framing analysis of In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) showed that approximately half used alarm frames. The effects of these framed messages may influence population attitudes to the acceptability of IVF. No research on media framing of British altruistic surrogacy exists, although there is research on media framing of commercial transnational surrogacy (Riggs and Due, 2013; Arvidsson et al, 2015; Authors, in press). This study therefore analysed the use of gain, loss, neutral, alarm or vulnerability frames of altruistic surrogacy in UK newspapers. An analysis of the type of construction as medical, legal, ethical, financial or social was also carried out to determine the focus of the framed messages.

## **Methods**

**Newspaper and article selection:** Using the search engine Lexis-Nexis, a representative range of newspapers were selected for inclusion in this study, defined as Serious newspapers ('The Times', 'The Sunday Times', 'The Independent', 'The Independent on Sunday', 'The Daily Telegraph', 'The Sunday Telegraph', 'The Guardian', 'The Observer') Middle-market ( 'Daily Mail', 'Mail on Sunday', 'The Express', 'The Sunday Express') and Tabloids ('The Sun', 'Daily Mirror', 'Sunday Mirror', 'News of the World'), according to existing typology (Williams et al, 2008). Article types were limited to – News Items, Features and Editorials. Excluded were Letters, Agony Aunt Columns, Book reviews, TV and

Radio Guides, Parliamentary Schedules, Law Briefs, Online articles and Obituaries. We also excluded duplicate articles and articles where the surrogate was involved in international (commercial) surrogacy. We included the whole of the UK distribution of newspapers, and excluded regional newspapers. Finally, although no start or end date was specified, we included the final edition of each newspaper (if more than 1 version was available).

**Data Analysis:** Content analysis was used to analyse the content of the newspaper articles using a specifically designed scoring grid (based on Sangster and Lawson, 2014) which was developed to assist with an overview of differences between newspaper type (Serious/ Middle-market/ Tabloid), year of publication, type of commissioning parents, framing that was used, including separate ratings for gain, loss, neutral, alarm (high/low) and vulnerability (high/low), and if the article was written with a medical, social, ethical, legal or a financial focus. Coding of titles and article content were carried out separately. Titles or main text were coded as gain framed if they indicated positive associations of national surrogacy, such as 'Couple look on as 18-year-old delivers baby of their dreams'. Loss frame was identified when negative associations were attributed to the surrogacy arrangement in the title or content, such as 'Together ... for only a moment', and neutral frame such as 'BMA to set out surrogacy rules'. High and low alarm frames were also coded (e.g. high alarm: 'she lied to her own children about the pregnancy' low alarm: 'I'm definitely going to do it again this year. I feel fine'), and high vulnerability –as indicated in the position taken by the paper on the effects of the surrogate arrangement on any of the parties involved (e.g: 'Certainly nobody should voluntarily enter an emotional and social minefield of this kind without counseling. The after-effects are bound to

ricochet throughout the rest of the family.’), or low vulnerability (e.g, ‘I feel no emotional ties to the baby – just proud to be able to do this. I couldn’t feel more detached if Angel had given birth to him’). Following a number of training sessions, the coding grid was agreed to ensure consistency of the content analysis. All three researchers rated the first 20 articles by discussion together. Researchers rated the remaining articles independently, followed by discussions between the researchers until full agreement was reached on all articles.

## **Results**

The Lexis-Nexis search was carried out in January 2015 (Monday-Saturday for inclusion of weekly papers N=1054) and February 2015 (Monday-Sunday for inclusion of Sunday papers N=247). After removal of articles meeting our exclusion criteria (n=850), 451 relevant articles were retrieved from the searches (Flow chart 1). Sampling was carried out because these numbers were too large for content analysis (see also e.g. Sangster and Lawson, 2014 who sampled a specific year; and Andsager et al, 2015 who sampled 1 random year, random weeks and random days per week). For our study all uneven years (N=234), and every other month were excluded (N=118), leaving 99 articles for detailed content analysis. During data analysis, a further nine articles were subsequently removed, as they failed to meet the inclusion criteria.

INSERT FLOW CHART 1 HERE

Articles on surrogacy appeared from 1984 to 2014, the majority focusing on heterosexual couples published between 2000 and 2004 and again between 2008 to 2014. The newspapers rarely reported on gay couples using British surrogacy (one report in 2010 and 1 in 2014), 2 referred to lesbian couples in 2000 and 2001, and 1



on a single woman in 2002. No single men were described. One commissioning couple was Italian/ Portuguese, and they were mentioned in the press 5 times and 1 couple was from the United Emirates (mentioned on 3 different occasions), two from Greece and 1 each from America, Uganda, Germany, Holland and Australia. The majority of commissioning couples (n=64), and all surrogates were British. Fourteen surrogates (50%) were in heterosexual relationships, 11(39.28%) were single and 1 (4%) lesbian. A surrogate grandmother was reported in 1998 and in 2004.

Content analysis of frames used in the titles by newspaper type, are show in Table 1a. Most papers used Loss frames (45.07%) followed by Gain (30.98%), and Neutral (23.94%) frames. Within newspaper types, half the Middle market press used Loss frames (50%) for example; Loss- “fight for a surrogate baby is thrown out by a judge” and the Tabloid used mainly gain “got our dream baby for a pair of leggings, two blouses,....” and Loss frames “mothers of babies they will never call their own” (45% each) and only minimal Neutral frames (9%). In contrast, the Serious papers used Loss (40%, e.g; “battle for surrogate twins must go to US ”), Neutral (31% “It felt so natural – I cut the cord and was the first to hold him”) and Gain (for surrogate) frames (28%-“ surrogate mothers feel no remorse for babies”) more evenly. Table 1b shows high Alarm framing (90.62%) was predominantly used in the titles, which accounted for 100% of the Tabloid for example; “the moral minefield” and 91% of the Middle market – e.g: “My daughter’s baby may have given me cancer” - and (87%) by the serious press- e.g; “... role in ‘rent a womb’ deal”. Table 1c shows the number of times high Vulnerability was used in the titles (78.94%) e.g; “The Department of Health and Social Security to study claims that surrogate babies have been born in secret”, which also far exceeded the amount of low Vulnerability (21.05%), with little

difference between and within Middle market and Tabloid newspaper types. The Serious press, although following the same trend, reported slightly more low Vulnerability framed articles compared to the Middle market (19%) and Tabloid press (18%), indicating a more balanced reporting trend.

#### INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

The content was analysed using the same coding strategy as the titles. Table 2a shows Loss frames (43.02%) e.g, “the whole thing has become a nightmare” were also the predominant frame used in the content of the articles, fairly evenly between newspaper types. Gain frames were also frequently used (36.04%) particularly for the Middle-market press (48.27%) e.g, “A gay man has been awarded the rights of access to a child he fathered for a lesbian couple” and the Tabloid (40%) e.g, “made their life complete” compared with the Serious press (26.19%) e.g, “another mark of acceptance is a four part television series.... it shows how surrogacy works, not how it goes wrong”. Neutral frames were again used most often by the Serious press (e.g. “Ethical guidelines for doctors helping childless couples to have babies by surrogacy are expected to be approved by the British Medical Association’s council tomorrow.”), suggesting a more balanced overall type of framing. High Alarm (Table 2b; e.g “fight for surrogate baby is thrown out by a judge”) was also used in the content by all newspaper types (79.26%), as opposed to low Alarm frames (20.73%), although the Middle-market was slightly more likely to use low Alarm (27.58%; e.g. “Instead, I felt an enormous sense of achievement. After all, this was what I’d set out to achieve”) than the Tabloid (20%; e.g; “I have never looked upon this baby as mine. I was happy because I knew I had made Colin and Louisa happy.”) or Serious press (15.78%; e.g; “Researchers found that parents show more warmth to surrogate

children.....”). Articles also wrote their content with high Vulnerability frames (75.90%) rather than low Vulnerability (24.09%). Between newspaper types, the Serious press were again more balanced with the amount of high Vulnerability (69.90%) for example; “but the only child they had been offered was a mentally retarded 12 year old boy” and low Vulnerability frames (30.95%; e.g., “We found only one instance of the surrogate having slight doubts at this time, with all other mothers reporting no problems.”) used in the content than the other newspaper types who were more likely to use high than low Vulnerability framed content (see Table 2c).

#### INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Articles were written with a focus on Social (31.32%), Legal (27.10%), Financial (16.86%) and Ethical issues (15.16%). Only 9% referred to Medical issues relating to the commissioning couple’s infertility or the medical risks the surrogate was exposed to. As can be seen from Figure 1, between newspaper types, the Middle-market press was more likely to construct their articles around legal issues, (e.g; “A woman left childless and infertile by a hospital blunder wept yesterday after a High Court judge refused to award her damages to fund a surrogate birth.”) followed by the Serious newspapers (35.29%; “Her award is likely to be consumed by legal costs, leaving her in debt”). The Tabloids infrequently discussed legal matters (17.64%). Similarly, the Serious press used ethical constructions more often (17.64%; e.g, “raised questions about the very meaning of human existence”) than the Middle market (14.89%; e.g, “The medical blunder victim denied the chance of surrogacy”) and Tabloid (11.76%; e.g, “This is a sordid, tragic trade. The product marketed is innocent human life created to satisfy the transient whims of selfish adults”), whereas focusing on the Financial aspects was more frequent in the Tabloid (20.58%; e.g, “I can’t believe I nearly swapped my twins for a cheque.”) than Serious (16.47%; e.g,

“but payment is ‘always within the guidelines’ although she will not reveal how much...” or Middle-market press (14.89%). The Tabloid and Middle-market were likely to construct their articles around Social aspects of surrogacy: Tabloid, (41.17%; e.g, “My life has been a misery since I decided to be a surrogate mother. Worse than that, my children have suffered too.”) and Middle-market (40.42%; e.g, “she had trusted the couple, and because surrogacy is illegal in France, she had no formal agreement. What was she to do with these twins? She could not afford to bring them up herself, yet who would look after them? And whose children were they?”) compared to the Serious press (22.35%; e.g, “Most couples view their surrogate as a commodity to be discarded as soon as they have their baby. They don’t think through the implications for the children of cutting her out of their life.”).

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

## **Discussion**

This study of a representative sample of British newspaper media has shown there was a substantial interest in surrogacy across newspaper types since the first reported case in 1984 to date. The analysis of the content has demonstrated that the newspapers mainly reported on heterosexual couples using national altruistic surrogacy. Loss frames were more often used than Gain or Neutral frames in the titles and in the content. Similarly, high Alarm and high Vulnerability were predominantly used in the titles and to a large extent in the content too. These relatively extreme frames may be a reflection of the time in which national altruistic surrogacy was reported, and represents the nature of news reporting.

Research on attitudes towards surrogacy, at the same time period as many media reports were also largely negative throughout the 1980's, 90's and well into the millennium (Dunn et al, 1988; Appleton, 1990; Bromham, 1991; Halman et al, 1992; Genius et al, 1993; Krishnan, 1994; Frazier and Chapman, 1994; BMA, 1996; Chliaoutakis et al, 2002; Suzuki et al, 2006; Poote and van den Akker, 2009), although other recent surveys report more variable attitudes (Dempsey and Critchley, 2010; Constantinidis and Cook, 2012). This demonstrates a general discord between the practice of surrogacy and the populations' perception of it, and a simultaneous alarmist framed media portrayal of British altruistic surrogacy. Although it is not possible to demonstrate a causal link, other research on media framing confirms it influences not only attitudes, but also how definitions, attributions, evaluations and recommendations are made from the framed messages (Tewksbury and Scheufele, 2009), and can provide a new normative context (Shalev and Lemish, 2011). The influence of the newspapers on attitudes to altruistic surrogacy may be more pronounced where conflicts relating to parenthood and the importance of a genetic link (van den Akker, 2007) and traditional families are reported (Markens, 2007). Media reports of health and social issues are frequently framed as alarming (Chang, 2012) which is confirmed in our study of surrogacy and a Canadian study of IVF (Sangster and Lawson, 2014). Alarm framed information can contribute to anxiety (McNaughton-Cassill, 2001), which is not a beneficial possible outcome in surrogacy.

The potential consequences of this discord, conflict or anxiety are problematic. Surrogacy is not usually a 'preferred' option for infertile commissioning couples (van den Akker, 2007), with full surrogacy preferred to partial surrogacy (Appleton, 1990; Bromham, 1991; Frazier and Chapman, 1994; BMA, 1996; Suzuki et al, 2006;

Constantinidis and Cook, 2012). Non-biological or non-genetic treatment options are not concordant with traditional family building norms and Euro-American kinship models. Adaptation to this biogenetic difference with the child may be difficult as is reported in gamete donation (Frith, 2015), or lead to a moral discord as reported in commercial transnational surrogacy (Arvidsson et al, 2015). Additionally, the infertility itself may be stigmatising (Bell, 2013), leading to further cognitive dissonance about the practice of surrogacy (van den Akker 2001). The same principles do not apply to gay or single men or single older women, because in their case it is not useful to disguise mode of conception, and surrogacy may offer a preferred option with a closer genetic tie and the promise of a new-born baby than would be possible in adoption.

Most articles were written with a focus on Social and Legal issues. Financial and Ethical issues were discussed less, probably because UK surrogacy is altruistic and payment or advertising for surrogates is illegal (Surrogacy arrangements Act, 1985). However, few newspapers referred to Medical issues on (the majority of) commissioning couples' infertility, or medical risks to the surrogate. Furthermore, the Middle-market and Serious newspapers were more likely to construct their articles around legal issues, reflecting the professional readership likely to afford commissioning a surrogate ([www.nmauk.co.uk](http://www.nmauk.co.uk)). The Tabloid infrequently discussed legal matters and their readership is more likely to include the less affluent, less educated population surrogates tend to be drawn from (van den Akker, 2007). The Tabloid and Middle-market were twice as likely as the Serious press to construct their articles around social aspects, again reflecting the interests of the target audiences (Williams et al, 2008; [www.nmauk.co.uk](http://www.nmauk.co.uk)).

In conclusion, although our study has reported on numbers of newspaper articles reporting on altruistic national surrogacy, data sampling was carried out (Riffe et al, 2007). Sampling is common in other research of media framing (Hilton et al, 2010; Sangster & Lawson, 2014), and our sampling procedure was random. The negative attitudes to altruistic surrogacy reported in public surveys (e.g, Poote and van den Akker, 2009) may be due more to cultural anxieties induced by the negative media portrayals (McNaughton-Cassill, 2001) than the actual reality of problems with surrogacy arrangements itself (Teman, 2008). Print media is reported to have an influence on attitude formations (Tewksbury and Scheufele, 2009), and we found that the UK tabloid press (focusing on social and financial constructions), which caters for a different audience than the middle-market and serious papers (focusing on legal issues facing commissioning couples), informs their audiences differently through their distinct foci. According to Jaworski (2009) frames are 'used to talk about social issues' (p109). The manner in which someone's beliefs are impacted by media messages depends on personal factors such as race, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and sexual orientation (Jaworski, 2009), and framing can influence how individuals view what is happening in the world. Future research could investigate how framed media messages can inform people about how to articulate their opinions and how to take action.

**3,857**

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